

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Third Sunday in Lent
28 February 2016

Scripture readings:

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalms 63:1-8

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

I'm encouraged by the theological challenge that the texts provide us today because I get a sense that the tradition is speaking out of both sides of its mouth. Can you imagine that! The Bible! In the Corinthian text we're given the clear indication, I believe, that people are struck down in the wilderness because God was not pleased with them and that those who misbehaved - twenty-three thousand - fell in a single day because God wasn't happy with what they were doing! And some were destroyed by serpents because they were moaning and complaining, and these things happened to them to serve as an example and they were written down for an instruction to us on whom the end of the ages have come, so if you think you're standing, watch out! You'd better behave.

*You better watch out, you better not cry.
You better not pout; I'm telling you why:
Santa Claus is coming to town.*

Well, there is a popular Santa Claus view of God. You behave and you get your stocking filled with good things. You misbehave and you get struck down - at least a bag of coal! God is in the business of rewarding and punishing us for good or bad behavior. That's not an uncommon religious idea and it's not a new one, is it? But frankly, friends, that's not what I hear coming out of the mouth of Jesus in the gospel text today.

Jesus asks the hard question: What about people who suffer who are apparently not deserving of the suffering? Now frankly I don't think there *are* any of those. Who was I having a discussion with recently about presidential candidates and affairs and which presidents had affairs and which didn't. Well, the ones who had affairs are the ones we know about. There may have been presidents who had affairs that we don't know about. And the question was - Did their personal life affect their presidency? I'm not going to answer that one for you.

But there was something in the Bible today about the presidential campaign. Did you hear it? The **Jebusites!** [*laughter and groaning*] Sorry, I couldn't resist!

Jesus asks the hard question, the really hard question, the question I think we all ask all the time. Do you think that these Galileans whose blood was mixed with the sacrificial blood of animals suffered in this way because they were worse sinners than all Galileans? Was God really punishing them because they were worse? Of course, in parenthesis you might add "worse than you are." That's a fair question.

Or how about the tower of Siloam. Do you think they were worse offenders than all the other people living in Jerusalem, the holy city? The World Trade Center Towers - were all the people who died there greater sinners than people in the rest of the world? Was that God's judgment on New York or the United States? Jesus asked the question. I ask the question. I invite *you* to ask the question. Is that the kind of God we have, who sits around waiting to be jollificated by us who are the creatures? Do you really believe there is something you as a human being can do to make God happy? Really? What is that? I think maybe the answer could be: *Be human. Be what it is we were created to be.* But I don't think that God's happiness depends on anything that *we* do. Scripture tells us that in the beginning God creates the heavens, the earth, and everybody in it, and God stands back from what God creates, God looks at it and says, "*This is good!*"

Are *you* a part of creation? Do you hear that message from God, that you are beloved and good for no other reason than that God created you. You've heard the expression "*That's a face only a mother could love.*" That's why we need to reclaim - at least in part - the motherhood of God.

Did you hear this extraordinary Collect at the beginning of the liturgy today? "*God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.*" That's an extraordinary admission that we are, in fact, entirely creaturely and God loves us because we are God's creatures. And, friends, I can't convince myself after all of these years of my life - although I was frequently taught, as were you, many times - that God can be displeased with you and with me and with everybody else if we do bad things. Well, that's one kind of God but it's not the kind of God I hear Jesus talking about in the gospel today. Jesus is asking the hard question: Do you really think that because that happened to the Galileans they were worse than others, that because the tower fell on them they were worse sinners than you? Do you really think that?

Jesus answers, "*No, I tell you! That's not what that's all about...*" But there's not a period at the end of that sentence. He does say, "*Unless you repent you will all perish just as they did.*" Oh, what's that? It doesn't say that God will punish you; it says if you miss the point of God's love, you will live without believing in God's love. And that's a different way of living from those who *believe* in God's love.

"*No, I tell you!*" God's not in the business of punishing, but if you live outside of the love of God, your life will look like the mess that it is when God's love isn't there. And that will do horrible things to you and horrible things to your relationships with others. And primarily it will do horrible things in terms of your relationship to yourself, how you see yourself - as unforgivable, irremediable, beyond God's help, outside of the pale, damned by God to eternal torture, unacceptable. "*No, I tell you.*" That's not how God is. No, what we suffer may be a part of the mystery of life, and it may be an alluring idea to develop a theology that our suffering is God's punishment. But Jesus very clearly says, "*No, I tell you.*" No, it's not God's punishment, but there *is* a benefit to having a relationship, a loving relationship with God, to acknowledging God as our creator, to not excluding God's love from our lives. To believe that we are eternally and forever loved by God empowers us then to love ourselves which empowers us to love others and to expand the pool of candidates who benefit from that. This idea of Jesus, I believe, is what empowers the ability for him and those who follow to say, "*Love your enemies as you love yourself.*" And this is what it takes: It takes the energy to believe that we are not by nature necessarily lovable ourselves but that we are indubitably loved always by God. And as people who acknowledge, accept, receive and believe that divine affection that cures whatever is in us that is broken or sick or crippled and allows us then to share what it is God has given us in complete and total abundance with others. And that means not just with those we think deserve it but with all we acknowledge, believe, teach and confess who are created by God just as we are and who are therefore our - like it or not - brothers and sisters all around the world.

So loving others isn't "being nice." It may be being honest about what it is we believe about God. Now you are entitled to keep your curmudgeonly idea of God as a testosterone-ridden, gray-haired, bearded, angry, spear-throwing white man in the clouds somewhere who is waiting for you to mess up so that he can condemn you to hell and laugh as you go, or you can believe what Jesus says - "*No, I tell you - comma - but unless you include this love of God which gives you life and gives life to every other yokel in the world, unless you include that love in your life you end up in the same misery as anybody else who lives without God's love because that's like living without your generative parent. It doesn't work.*"

So Jesus goes on after taking on thousands of years of theological mess, answering it with a part of a sentence - "*No, I tell you. That's not the way it is, but you do need God in your life. Repent!*" You know that we're in the middle of Lent. That's why the hymns are so dirgified and we didn't sing a hymn on the way in and

the choir tried to be pious and quiet. Repent! It has nothing to do with beating yourself up or pretending that you're sorry all to pieces about your sinfulness. To repent has to do with turning around, going back, going back to the source, going back to this loving God.

The best illustration of that is another parable which wasn't in the text today but probably sorts out to be my favorite because it's most clearly explicit about the love of God - the Prodigal Son. I think the title we give that is the problem with it because it sort of indicates that the kid who left and squandered the inheritance he wasn't due yet because his father hadn't died yet and ends up in the barrooms and the brothels and the pig pen and all the rest - that he's the problem. That story isn't so much about that son, if you ask me. That son turns around and comes back home eventually. That son says, "*I have screwed up.*" Repentance. He returns home and his father leaves the house, across the porch, into the dirt road, has his arms open waiting for this poor filthy mess to come back and scoops him up and loves him back into life.

That's only the first part of the story. The important part for us, I think, is the other son who goes out of the house also. He slinks out the back door into the beautifully manicured garden. He's not going to get himself dirty and cries and pouts and screams and carries on and is jealous because his father dares to love his brother, dares to receive his brother back, calls for a feast, bathes him, dresses him, even puts a gold ring on him, shoes on his feet, silk, satin, perfume. He gets rid of all of the mess that he returned with. And the son who lived with all of that privilege all the time his brother was gone is jealous and filled with hate. And this is why Jesus says, "*No, I tell you*" because his idea of God was that what he had was God's reward to him for being good, for being nice. It had nothing to do with that. It had to do with him being the son of a loving father, and he proved that he wasn't very nice by the way he acted, didn't he? Who needs that mess?

And so the father leaves the house the second time to retrieve Goody Two-Shoes in all of his self-righteous hypocritical piety in the very well-manicured garden, his father's garden. By the way, the pig pen belonged to the father, too. The father leaves the house and goes out to find him out back and bring him in and teach him more than he had to teach the other one who found out by himself that a life outside of the house of God is a pretty ugly existence.

And so Jesus says, "*No, your idea about God is messed up, and without God you're in real trouble.*" Unless you repent, unless you return, unless you go back into the house, life will be a mess and you will perish just as the others did, the others you think didn't deserve a thing or were being punished for their misdeeds.

Then Jesus tells this extraordinary parable about the fig tree. Fasten your seatbelts for this one because there's something in this parable that I find extraordinary, and you won't find it depicted in church windows. There's a fig tree and it's not bearing fruit, and the man who owned the garden where it was planted went to look for the fruit. There was none and he says to the gardener, "*Look, I've been patient for three years. Cut the thing down. All it's doing is wasting the soil, taking nutrients from the other fruit-bearing plants. Get it out of here.*" And the gardener, who I think might be metaphorically representing Jesus, says, "*Let it alone for one more year until I dig around it and until I put manure on it.*" You know what manure is? If you need an explanation, I'll tell you at coffee hour. *[laughter]*

I see in this parable Jesus representing himself as the dreck, the manure, the garbage that is used to fertilize the garden of this world to reproduce and produce what it was intended to in the first place. Maybe the early church is seeing this as him offering himself to provide nutrients and food and water and all that is necessary for life to appear on the branches that appear to be dead. *I will give them what they need for life.* And he does that by living with us and experiencing all that we experience so that we might know how to grow and blossom and flourish and do what needs to be done and be without the excuse that we didn't have what was

needed to do it. All that is needed is provided by God's self for us to be what we were created to be - which is not "nice" but loving. I'm nice to people I like, but I *have* to as a Christian learn to love the people I cannot stand, the people who think differently from me, who believe differently from me, who look different from me, who act different from me, who may even hate me.

And so it is we return to the Collect for today which says that. It's amazing what happens in the Collect in a couple of little sentences, isn't it? *"Keep us so that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to us in body and which may assault our soul because we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves."* So Jesus says, *"Your idea about God is wrong, but you need God to live well. So don't run away from God just because your theology is cracked. But go back to God. Turn back to your loving Creator. Go back to your Mother. Go back to your Father. Repent or your life will look like it has perished. You will bear no fruit. You might even be nice, but you'll be dead."* And Jesus says, *"Don't do that because I like big fat ripe juicy figs from you because you are fig trees. So go bear figs!"*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.